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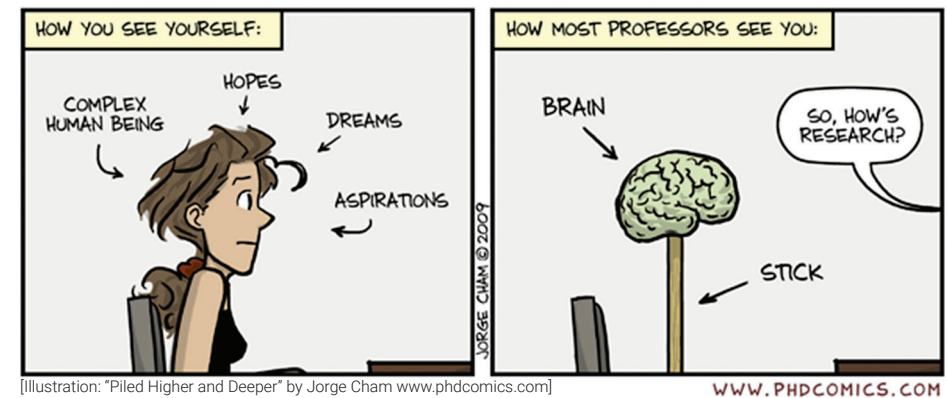
Supervision guideline
(adopted from WaSo project)



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How to become an ideal supervisor

A reflective guide on how we can become better supervisors for Master's and PhD students in a competitive environment

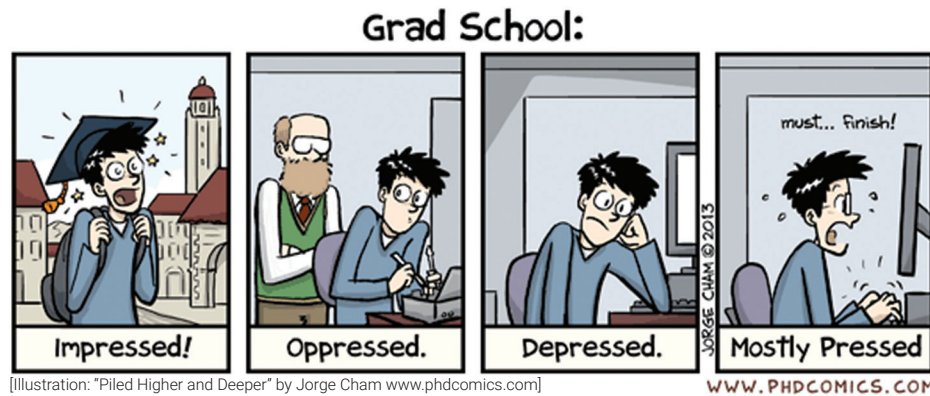


[Illustration: "Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham www.phdcomics.com]



What can our universities/faculties/departments do to make us better supervisors?

- Be creative and find incentives
- Plan wisely to allocate necessary time for supervision by providing adequate workloads
- Show appreciation of the time and effort of the supervisors
- Provide and facilitate funds and facilities to research/education
- Provide administrative support so the supervisors can prioritise supervision on subject matters
- Be proactive on providing training and quality improvement opportunities



Foreword

This supervision guide has been produced as part of the activities of the two NORHED (Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development) projects «Water and Society – Asia and Africa» (www.wasoproject.org), funded by NORAD (The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation).

The projects are about capacity building within the 11 participating institutions of higher education; three universities in Norway, four in Africa and four in Asia. Together they aim to raise the institutions' capacities in cross-disciplinary topics related to water management and climate research. The participation of the universities in the project is based on their skills and strengths in various disciplines, ranging from engineering to political science. Some of the partners have a long history of cooperation, with trust and friendship that was built up over many years prior to the NvORHED call. Good supervision skills are at the core of building capacity at institutional, organisational and individual level. Without proper supervision, knowledge will not be passed on and the student will be inadequately prepared for life after university.

Our students are the most valued results of the project and the future of our society. We expect them to go on and take the lead within science, technology and in society at large. As supervisors, we excel in their success. Good supervision is the most fundamental service of a university, yet it is often the most complicated service to give and receive. It is about the passage of knowledge and skills from a senior to a junior; from a teacher to a student. It is our hope that this guide will be used by both supervisors and students, thus providing help and guidelines for future supervision.

The initial version of this guide was discussed and developed during two project workshops. The project wishes to express sincere thanks to its scientific coordinator, Professor Harsha Ratnaweera of the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), for both the initiative and the time and effort put into producing the guide. We also express our gratitude to all participants in the workshops and the Principal Investigators of the WaSo projects, Professor S. B. Weerakoon of Peradeniya University and Professor Edward Kirumira of Makerere University, for supporting the initiative. Language editing and proof reading services were provided by Maria Sollohub of the University of Bergen.

Bergen, 2 May 2017

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Supervision – let us repeat what is right and not repeat the mistakes

Each and every one of us has gone through a supervision process during our Master's and PhD studies. While the years as university students were probably the best years of our lives, there were numerous positive and less positive moments related to our academic work. Many of us were without daily contact with our parents, thus our teachers and friends became the only sources of advice and comfort. It was a time where all of us would have benefitted from some professional support to guide our studies and lives. Did we get that help – and to the extent we were expecting it?

The answer probably varies greatly, although it is likely that most of us agree it could have been better. In our role as graduate supervisors in a modern society of universities, we should explore the possibilities to improve supervision practice.

There is a wide range of information and guidelines on supervision available in the public domain. Some universities have published their own guidelines, while there are monographs authored by supervisors and students on a general basis. The WaSo project (www.wasoproject.org) acknowledges the need to improve the capacity and competence of supervisors as one of the important steps to ensure high quality graduates and post-graduates with limited supervision resources.

Where should this process start? How can we become better supervisors? Is it possible to become the ideal supervisor? We have identified inaccurate or incomprehensive perceptions and assumptions related to supervision as a major reason for poor supervisory qualities. To improve upon these, we need to understand the expectations of both the students and ourselves.

In this process, we have formulated six questions posed by us, the supervisors, and verified our assumptions and perceptions with responses from graduate students from WaSo partner universities.

The six questions were:

- What does an MSc student expect from the supervisor?
- What does a supervisor expect from an MSc student?
- Why are we not ideal MSc supervisors?
- What can we do to become better MSc supervisors?
- What can students do for us to become better MSc supervisors?
- What can our universities/faculties/departments do to make us better MSc supervisors?

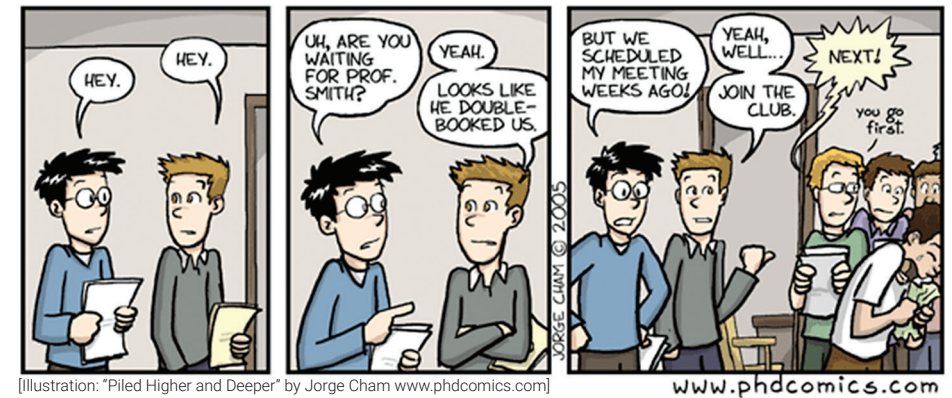
We posed the same questions to PhD students. We also asked graduate students to list what they expect from a supervisor.

• Influence on organisational issues

- Advocate availability of resources (infrastructure and facilities)
- Work together with administration to provide training for supervisors
- Influence university administration to make research priorities
- Seek access to latest research/publications and advancements

• Be a better manager

- Understand student background and needs
- Look for, and facilitate, funding sources
- Find smart ways to manage: organise research groups if there are several students
- Plan ahead for the resources and time needed
- Plan for funding of supervision through research grants
- Train yourself on finding grants and writing proposals



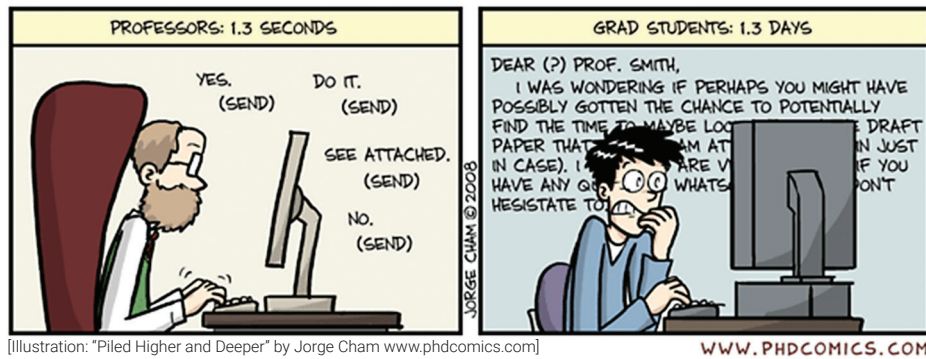
What can students do for us to become better supervisors?

- Be efficient during consultations: be prepared and well-structured to use the time optimally
- Ask critical questions and be reflective on the subject
- Be positive to provide input on updated knowledge that can be beneficial to both you and your supervisor
- Give the supervisor an opportunity to be well-prepared (time, questions)
- Hard-working students will also make supervisors hard-working

The way forward

The WaSo project has an ambition to improve the quality of supervision by making supervisors more aware of student needs so that they facilitate adequate resources and allocate the necessary time for all supervision-related tasks. The first step is to understand the expectations, problems and challenges discussed in the previous sections. Secondly, we can take the initiative to improve issues that depend on us and positively influence issues that depend on others. Our discussions have revealed the following actions that can be undertaken by students, university administrations and supervisors themselves.

AVERAGE TIME SPENT COMPOSING ONE E-MAIL



What can we do to become better supervisors?

• Knowledge

- Update our knowledge through scientific literature and lectures
- Be involved in research development
- Obtain adequate training on supervision and subjects
- Attend conferences to refresh knowledge
- Build networks with other supervisors and researchers
- Be involved in publications – including joint publications

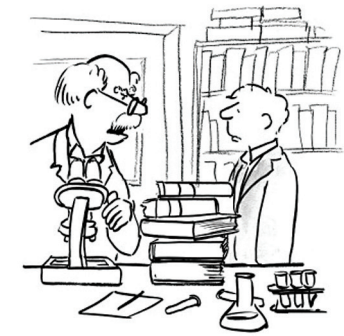
• Availability/Accessibility

- Find ways to increase motivation
- Devote time to student supervision / have a scheduled meeting with an agenda

What is expected from a supervisor?

We have all been graduate students at some point in time, and we have gathered substantial experience by guiding graduate students over the years. While it is a challenge to define exactly what today's graduate students expect from a supervisor, we agree that the following qualities should be expected from a supervisor:

- **A professional guide on subject matter:** someone who is knowledgeable on the subject and has access to scholarly materials.
- **A coordinator:** someone who has patience and is supportive during the process, helping to define a manageable scope and following up on deadlines.
- **A personal guide:** someone who is accessible and can understand the human behaviour and needs of graduate students – including guidance on building a career after graduation; someone with the flexibility and willingness to discuss relevant issues in a friendly and encouraging environment.
- **A resourceful person:** someone who can guide and assist in finding necessary funding and fellowships, as well as relevant contacts; someone with broad experience as a supervisor.



"I'm coordinating five different R&D projects, but SURE, I can spare a minute."

Illustration: <https://marialuisaallotta.wordpress.com/2011/12/05/supervisor/>

PhD students expect a supervisor to take on a managerial role over and above the expectations of MSc students:

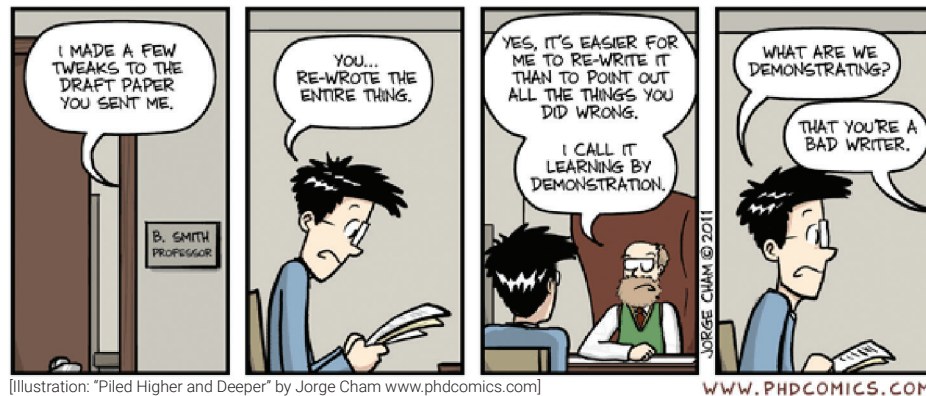
- **A manager:** someone who is willing to discuss alternative ideas and approaches but still guides candidates strictly along the set time lines; someone who is available and interested in continuous and frequent discussions at agreed intervals.

The above qualities were identified and discussed among the WaSo supervisors and refined through an iterative process.

In order to evaluate whether our understanding of the expectations of today's graduate students were accurate, we asked graduate students to list their expectations. In most cases, their ideas overlapped with ours, while they showed a more demanding and precise expectation with regard to involvement in time management, access to research resources, assistance in identifying potential sources of funding and fellowships, and in particular the role of a supervisor as a friendly and available discussion partner who is.

Our perceptions of what is anticipated from a supervisor are quite well aligned with what the students expect from us and what others have written in books and blogs. The conclusion is that we have a fairly good understanding of what is expected

from supervisor. However, it is a questionable whether each and every one of us is capable and willing to become a supervisor with these qualities. There are many reasons why we do not manage to become the ideal supervisor. Our daily schedules and responsibilities often conflict with the necessary requirements. In order to give priority to supervision activities among the many other activities that demand our time and attention, we also need to be motivated. Some students motivate us more than others...



[Illustration: "Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham www.phdcomics.com]

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What a supervisor expects from a student?

The most motivating factor for us as supervisors is the commitment and enthusiasm of the students. The moment we observe that a student is less motivated than we are, our motivation to prioritise time for the student decreases radically. When a student comes well-prepared to consultations, we see that (s)he is a smart and/or hard-working person who is motivated to work. In response to the preparedness of the student, we become motivated to donate our time.

It is also important for a student to respect the time limits available for consultations. The consultation time can be used efficiently and productively, or it can be wasted on less fruitful discussions about minor, distracting details.

We also appreciate good discussions, honesty and ethical conduct, positive teamwork and finally, the students' writing and communication skills and their willingness to learn.

When we look back and reflect on how the various students behaved while we were supervising them, we notice a big variation. While we ensure that we try our best to find sufficient supervision time for the good and committed students, we also need to think why a student might lack motivation and what we can do to motivate him/her.

Despite knowing what is expected from an ideal supervisor and our intentions to become ideal supervisors, it is often not possible to deliver these qualities in practice. We will analyse this issue in the next sections.

Why are we not ideal supervisors?

On several occasions, we have discussed the reasons why it is difficult for us to become ideal supervisors - the type we would like to be. Organisational challenges are identified as the biggest drawback to making us good supervisors. Sometimes we have too many students with limited resources (infrastructure, facilities, technical assistance), which itself is a result of limited institutional resources. Not only is it difficult to get adequate funding, but even after receiving funding, the procurement process becomes a tiring and time-consuming process.



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On some occasions, we also note that the lack of research culture at departments is a demotivating factor to devoting time to graduate supervision. The political stability of a country and its higher education administration is also a necessary factor.

To our own disappointment, we see that some of our colleagues get carried away with private consultancy practices that detract from available supervision time. Lack of financial and institutional incentives are the main reasons for this, but we are also affected by a general lack of time, motivation and our choice to prioritise other needs. In contrast to organisational challenges, these are factors that depend mostly on us, and we should not let our students become victims of them.

There is one more factor that features more often that we would like to acknowledge. Sometimes, we are just outdated with regard to knowledge, mainly due to the lack of time required for the renewal of our knowledge. Our lack of ability to understand the capabilities of students and the problems they face are also issues. Finally, when we feel that we are incapable of writing good research proposals or getting them funded, this can also affect our ability to become ideal supervisors.